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ABSTRACT

The cultural compatibility hypothesis suggests that black children attending an Afrocentric school (the culturally compatible condition) should have more positive outcomes, as indicated by ethnic identity, future expectations, and optimism, than black adolescents in a mainstream school (cultural incompatibility condition). Adolescents from an Afrocentric middle school with a predominantly black faculty and a student body that was 85% African American and a mainstream middle school were compared through their responses in structured interviews. The sample was 71% female and 57% from middle-class homes. Only 6% of the sample from both schools was from impoverished backgrounds. Students in the two schools did not differ in ethnic identity or ethnic disaffiliation, but those in the Afrocentric school anticipated more future events than the mainstream students. They also anticipated more career-related events and were more optimistic about the future. Results support the hypothesis that culturally compatible schools transmit implicit and explicit expectations of success. (Contains one table and five figures.) (SLD)

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School Context Effects in Black Adolescents' Perceptions of Self and the Future[1]

Sheri M. Anselmi[2] & Daniel B. Peters

Previous research on the cultural compatibility hypothesis has indicated that when the school environment is compatible with children's cultural patterns, improvements in learning can be expected to occur. Such research also has found that if children's cultural patterns are incongruent with school contexts, decreases in learning can be expected. As a number of writers have argued, Black adolescents often face a choice between: (a) identifying with their indigenous culture (that is, oppositional social identity); (b) avoiding the mainstream culture (that is, oppositional cultural frame of reference); and (c) disaffiliating from their own culture to maximize what they perceive to be success potential.

To date, research has largely examined the effects of cultural compatibility and/or incompatibility on children's learning styles and educational achievement. However, such effects also may be manifest in the personality characteristics and future expectations which characterize Black children in different school settings. Following the cultural compatibility hypothesis, for example, Black children attending an Afrocentric school (cultural compatibility condition) should have more positive outcomes, as indexed by ethnic identity, future expectations, and optimism for the future than should Black adolescents attending a mainstream culture school (cultural incompatibility condition).

As part of a larger ongoing investigation of adolescents' future narratives (Greene, 1993),

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the present study examined this hypothesis with Black adolescents in two private middle schools. The first, mainstream culture, school had a student population that was 50% Black and 50% Caucasian, with an exclusively Caucasian teaching staff. The second, Afrocentric, school had a student population that was 85% Black, 10% Hispanic, and 5% Caucasian, with a predominantly Black teaching staff.

Method

Sample

The exclusively Black sample was recruited from two private, middle schools in Northern California. Half of the sample was enrolled in an Afrocentric middle school and half enrolled in a mainstream middle school. No significant differences were obtained in demographic characteristics.

The sample was 71% female and 29% male. Forty-three percent of the sample derived from two-parent families, 57% derived from single-parent families. Fifty-seven percent of the sample derived from middle-class homes, 37% derived from working-class homes, and 6% derived from impoverished backgrounds.

Procedure

Adolescents participated in 90-minute, individual interviews in which they completed a series of structured and semi-structured questionnaires. Adolescents' sense of communality and agency were measured using the *Expressiveness* and *Instrumentality* subscales, respectively, of the Personality Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence & Helmreich, 1978).

Ethnic identity was measured using the *Affirmation and Belonging* subscale of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1990). Adolescents' disaffiliation from

indigenous culture was measured using the *Other Group Orientation* subscale of the MEIM (Phinney, 1990).

Using the Future Narrative Interview (Greene, 1990), participants also described the events which they anticipated in the future, including the ages at which they expected each event to occur. As shown in Table 1, three measures were obtained from adolescents' expectancies in two domains, educational and career achievement.

Results

Self-Perception

As shown in Figure 1 and contrary to prediction, Black adolescents in the two educational settings did not differ in either *instrumentality or communality*. No gender differences in ethnic identity and ethnic disaffiliation were obtained, and the Gender x School Context interaction failed to reach significance.

Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Disaffiliation

As shown in Figure 2 and contrary to prediction, Black adolescents in the two educational settings differed neither in ethnic identity (as measured by MEIM *Affirmation and Belonging* scores) nor in ethnic disaffiliation (as measured by MEIM *Other Group Orientation* scores). No gender differences in ethnic identity and ethnic disaffiliation were obtained, and the Gender x School Context interaction failed to reach significance.

Narrative Density and Extension

As shown in Figure 3, Black adolescents' enrolled in the Afrocentric school anticipated more future events (*narrative density*) than did adolescents enrolled in the mainstream school ($p<.01$). No gender effects were obtained and the Gender x School Context interaction failed to

reach significance. Contrary to prediction, adolescents in the two school settings did not differ in the projected length of their futures (*narrative extension*). No gender effects were obtained and the Gender x School Context interaction failed to reach significance.

Future Optimism

As shown in Figure 4, Black adolescents enrolled in the Afrocentric school were more optimistic about their futures (*narrative optimism*) than were adolescents enrolled in the mainstream school ($p<.05$). No gender effects were obtained and the Gender x School Context interaction failed to reach significance.

Educational and Career Achievement

Contrary to prediction, adolescents did not differ in their expectations of educational achievement. No gender effects were obtained and the Gender x School Context interaction failed to reach significance. However, as shown in Figure 5, Black adolescents enrolled in the Afrocentric school anticipated significantly more career-related events than did adolescents enrolled in the mainstream school ($p<.05$).

Discussion

Although preliminary, the present findings provide partial support for the predicted effects of school context in adolescents' narratives of the future. As noted previously, adolescents enrolled in the Afrocentric school anticipated more future events (*density*), anticipated more career-related events (*career density*) and were more optimistic about the future than were adolescents enrolled in the mainstream school.

One implication of these findings is that when schools are culturally compatible (as, in the present instance, by emphasizing Black history in the US, by emphasizing the achievements of

contemporary Black role models, and by emphasizing hard work and achievement in the student population), they transmit implicit and explicit expectations that students enrolled in that setting *can and will* achieve. The institutionalization of such expectations stand in sharp contrast to the often debilitating effects of more "sympathetic" communications that often occur between teachers and Black students in mainstream institutions (e.g., Graham, 1993).

The present findings further suggest that when such expectations are institutionalized (as in the Afrocentric school), students internalize a positive valuation of self and thus anticipate more events in the life course, more career-related achievement, and are more optimistic about the likelihood of achieving their goals.

That school context effects failed to emerge in self-perception and ethnic identity is not an altogether surprising result. As a number of authors have suggested (e.g., Archer, 1982; Phinney, 1989; 1992), self-perception, and ethnic identity may not become salient or consolidated until late adolescence. As the sample was composed of early to mid adolescents, enrolled in middle school, the present study may have represented an off-time early assessment of school context effects in adolescent self-perception and ethnic identity. Further research with older adolescent samples will be needed to address that possibility.

Future research will examine the role of parents' (racial) socialization techniques as a mediator of school context effects in adolescents' future expectancies.

Table 1

Overall Narrative and Domain Density and Extension Measures

- *Narrative Density*, the total number of life events described.
- *Narrative Extension*, the most distant future point anticipated (e.g., the oldest age for the set of events described).
- *Career Density*, the number of career events anticipated (e.g., job promotion).
- *Career Extension*, the oldest age at which adolescents anticipated career events.
- *Career Optimism*, adolescents' confidence they would be successful in that domain.
- *Education Density*, the number of education events anticipated (e.g., college graduation).
- *Education Extension*, the oldest age at which adolescents anticipated education events.
- *Education Optimism*, adolescents' confidence that they would be successful in that domain.

Figure 1

Personality Attributes by School

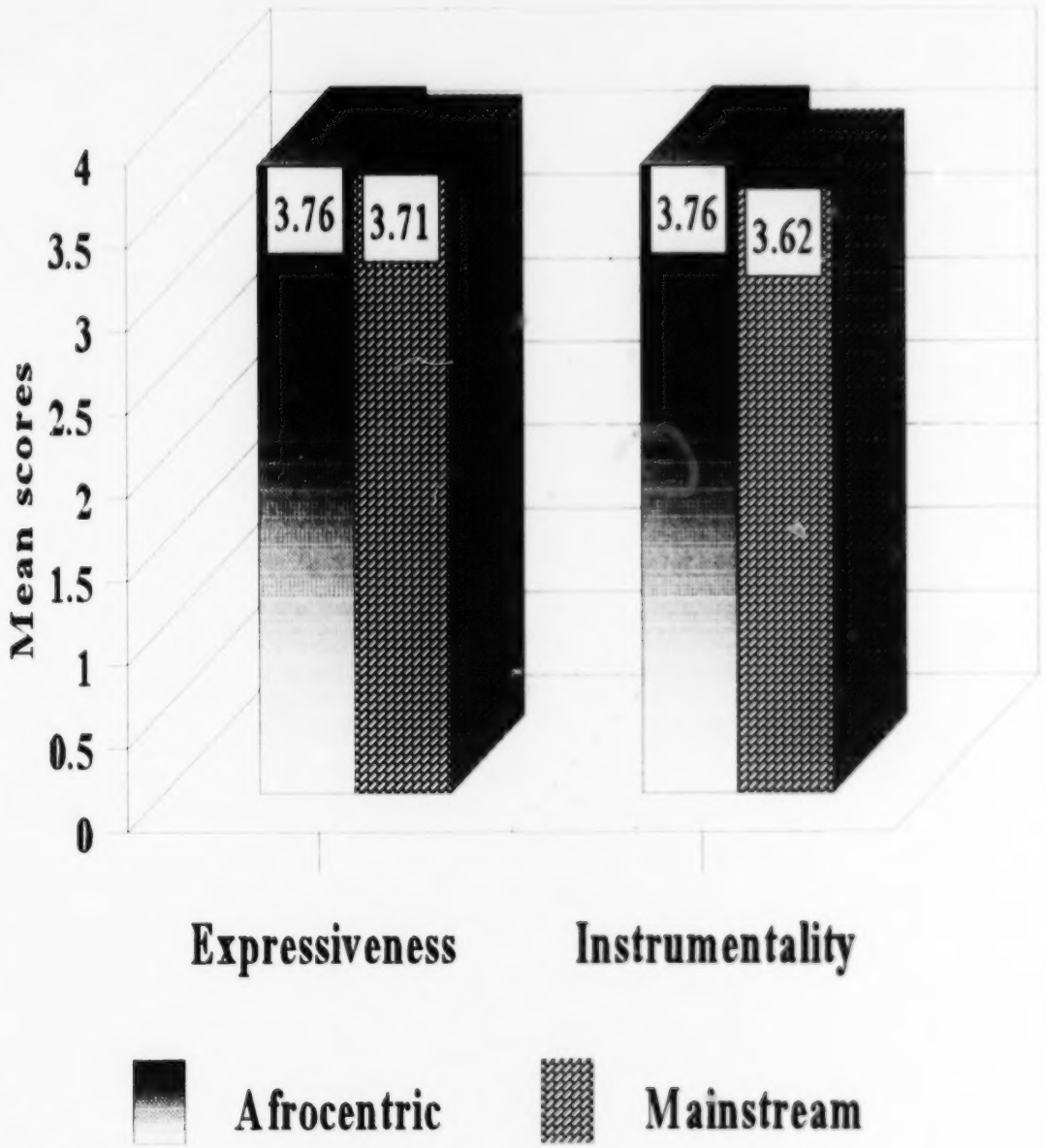

Figure 2

Ethnic Identity Subscale Scores by School

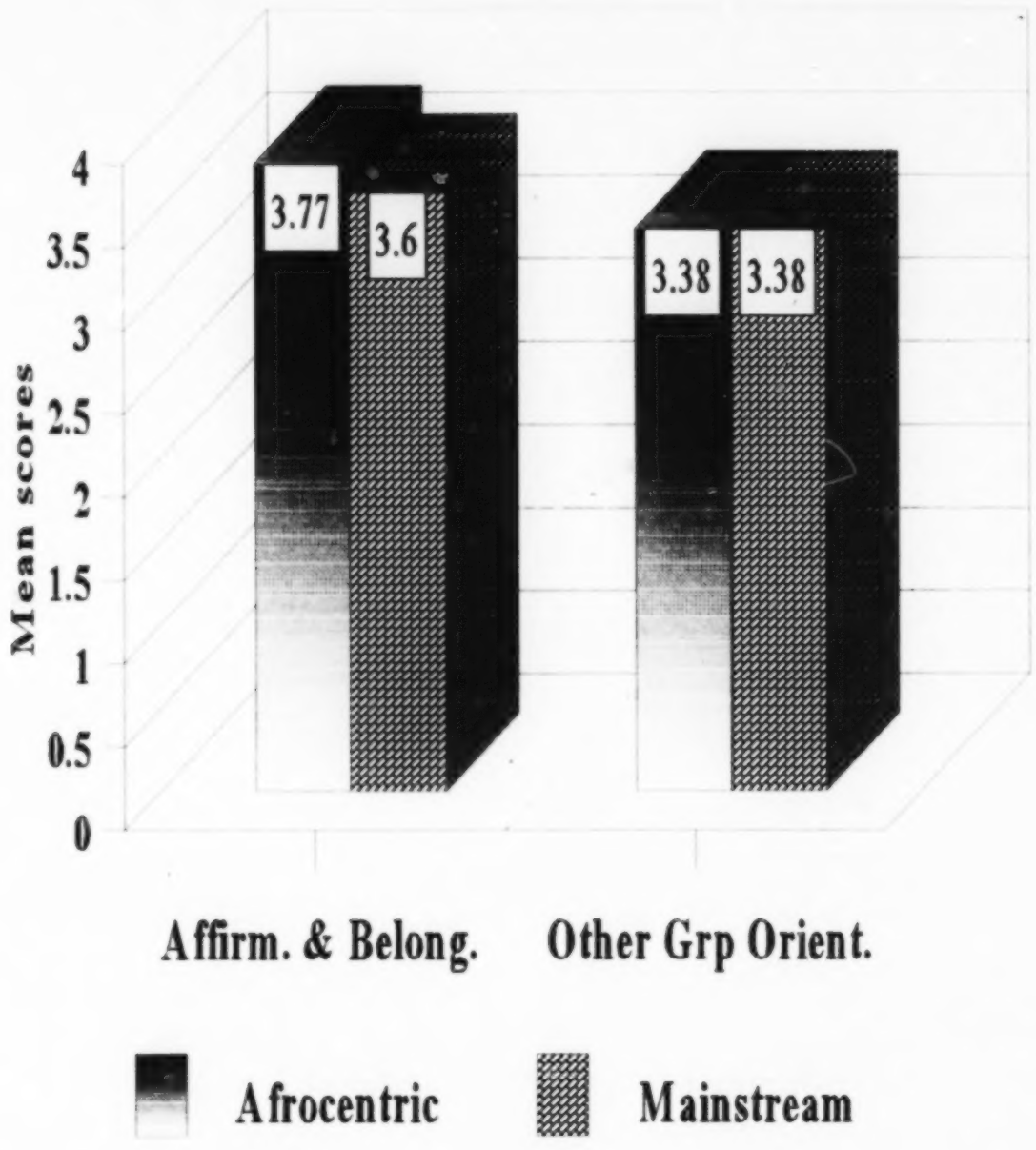

Figure 3

Future Events Anticipated by School

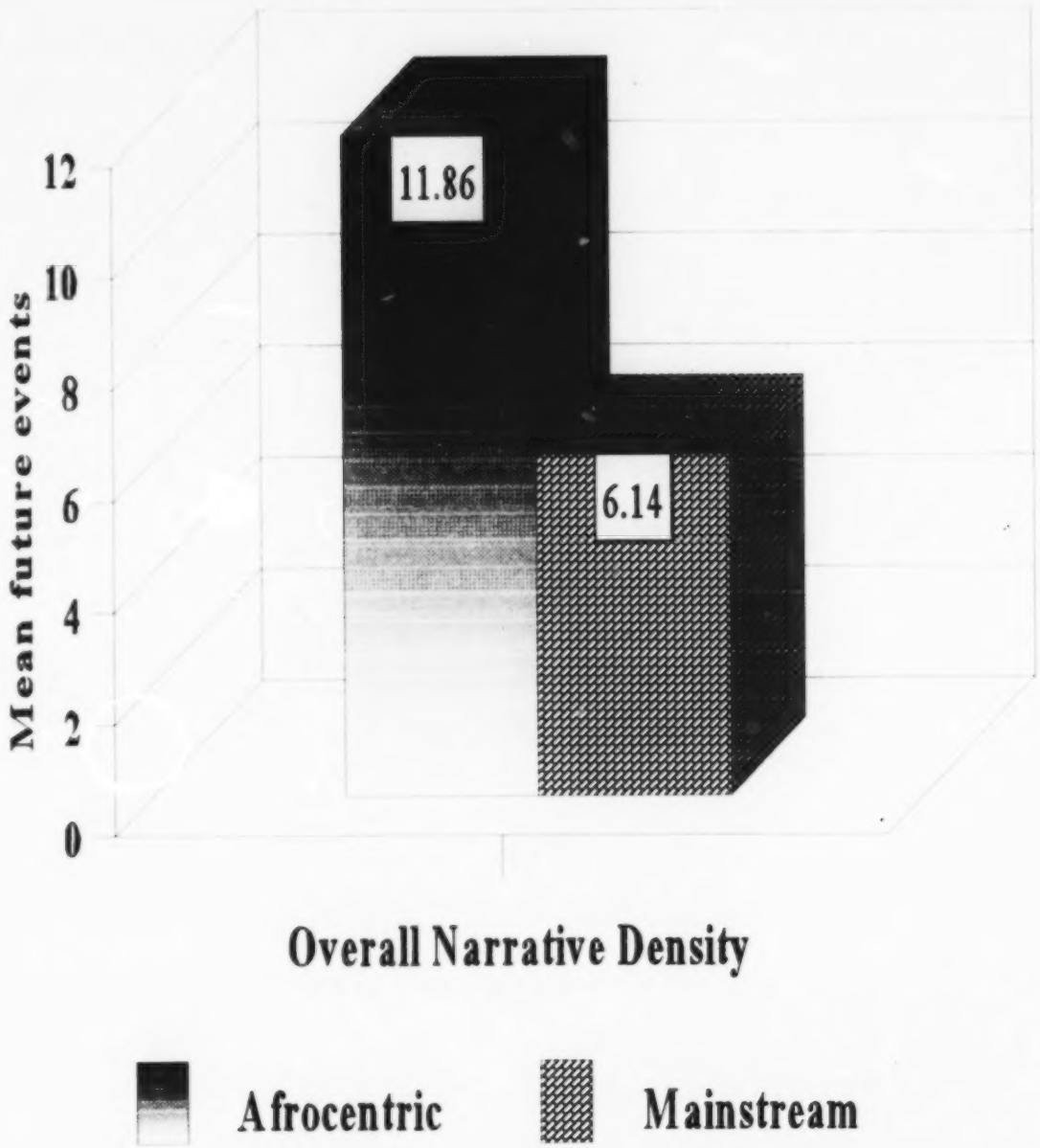

Figure 4

Overall Future Optimism by School Context

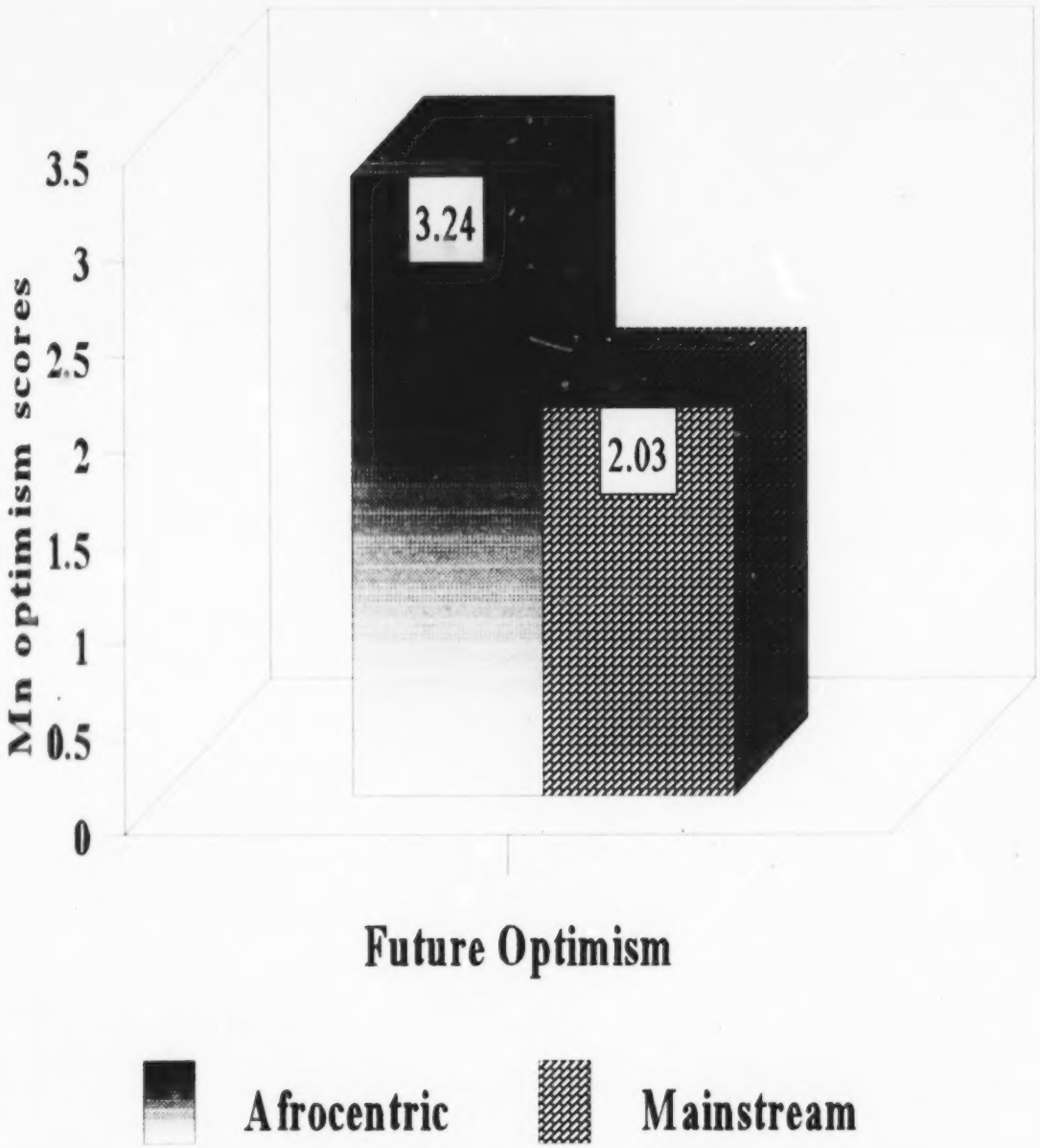

Figure 5

School Context Effects in Career Density